LOCKE'S CASE FOR THE PRIMARY-SECONDARY QUALITY DISTINCTION

Text source:

Essay Concerning Human Understanding, bk. 2 ch. 8 & ch. 21 sections 1-3

LOCKE'S PRIMARY-SECONDARY QUALITY DISTINCTION

- **PRIMARY QUALITIES** (shape, size, motion-or-rest, solidity)
  - These are intrinsic, non-relational qualities in bodies.
  - Our ideas of these qualities *resemble* the qualities themselves.

- **SECONDARY QUALITIES** (colors, odors, tastes, felt textures…)
  - These are in material bodies ***only as causal powers*** to produce certain sorts of sensations in us.
  - These causal powers ***result from the PQs***. It is simply that such-and-such a microstructure configuration of PQs interacts with our senses to produce such-and-such a sensation in us.
    - So the SQs are really nothing in the object over and above the PQs.
  - Our *ideas* of these qualities ***in no way resemble*** the qualities themselves. (After all, the qualities themselves are just causal powers to produce sensations in us – and these causal powers just result from the micro-configuration of PQs.)

HOW DOES LOCKE ARGUE FOR THIS DISTINCTION?

- Commentators disagree about just how it is that Locke hopes to prove his distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Broadly speaking, there are two main lines of interpretation:

  - Some stress that Locke's PQs seem intended to capture those features of experience that provide us with **a conception of an objective world**, distinct from the merely subjective series of observer-relative sensations.

  - Others emphasize Locke's appeal to **scientific theorizing** in distinguishing the explanatorily basic PQs from the less fundamental SQs.

(1) ARGUMENTS APPEALING TO OUR CONCEPTION OF AN OBJECTIVE WORLD

(A) We are subject to illusion and perceptual variation with respect to secondary qualities, but not with primary qualities.

- E.g. The porphyry example; a cold and a hot hand dunked into the same water; wine and toothpaste.

(B) No matter how we divide up a material body, it retains PQs; but its SQs change.

- E.g. Consider the pounding of an almond into oil.

Are these arguments successful?

OTHER 'OBJECTIVITY' ARGUMENTS LOCKE MIGHT ALSO HAVE TRIED?

(C) 'Common sensibles' vs. 'special sensibles'

- Perhaps we need the 'common sensibles' to triangulate in on the intrinsic or objective qualities of things?

(D) We need the PQs to have any conception of an enduring objective world at all, as distinct from a mere flux of subjective sensations.

- Consider: One could still navigate the world if blind with respect to any particular type of SQ. But the same is not true of any PQ. (Someone who was 'size-blind' or 'shape-blind' would have lost the objective world altogether.)

(2) ANOTHER STRATEGY: APPEAL TO OUR BEST SCIENTIFIC THEORIZING

- **We need PQs for science, but we don't need SQs.**

  - The PQs are those qualities posited by the **'corpuscularian hypothesis'** as characterizing the fundamental nature of matter. The best 17th C science suggests these are likely the intrinsic qualities of matter, and that other qualities are merely the causal results from these.

  - Locke *isn't* then attempting to establish the PQ/SQ distinction by appeal to considerations of relativity etc. Rather he is simply illustrating the power of scientific explanations that rest on PQs alone.

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF THE 'APPEAL TO SCIENCE' INTERPRETATION

- If we accept this line of argument, then we 21st C types are likely to add new PQs to Locke's list (e.g. properties like *wavelength*, *charge*, *spin*), and perhaps drop others (e.g. *solidity*?).

- Does this understanding of the distinction make it merely a contingent fact whether a given quality is a PQ or SQ?
  - Can we imagine a possible world where science did have to focus on certain of 'our' SQs – say a world where 'being blue' was systematically interrelated to the behavior of bodies in rich and pervasive ways (e.g. a world where everything blue caused nearby bodies to be attracted to it and melt, say)?